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ABSTRACT

The use of a Jonathan Schwartz essay as a prose model to teach writing lends itself appropriately to classroom discussions on various aspects of autobiography and general narrative design. Such use has proved to be particularly helpful with young writers because of its deceptively simple style and language and its use of a variety of sophisticated composing skills. The essay can serve as stimulus for class discussion to generate insights about the essay's style and structure and to explore the reasons for using prose models to improve student writing. An examination of a student essay shows the effects of Schwartz's prose, particularly the use of vivid and appropriate detailing and stylistic experimentation. Schwartz's emphasis on language style and on the importance of writing as a vehicle for self-knowledge helps composition classes become more conscious of these principles and more interested in integrating them into their own work. (Schwartz's essay and a sample student essay are included.) (EL)

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TRACING THE NARRATIVE "I":

USING A PROSE MODEL AS GUIDE TO STUDENT WRITING

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CS 209 588

For the past few years I have introduced the following Jonathan Schwartz essay to students in my composition courses. The sketch lends itself appropriately to classroom discussions on various aspects of autobiography and general narrative design. It is a particularly helpful prose model for use with young writers because of its deceptively simple style and language; moreover, it manages to employ a variety of sophisticated composing skills while presenting a theme that is both direct and accessible.

> I am running down an alley with a stolen avocado, having climbed over a white brick fence and into the forbidden back yard of a carefully manicured estate at the corner of El Dorado and Crescent Drive in Beverly Hills, California. I have snatched a rock-hard Fuerte avocado from one of the three avocado trees near the fence. I have been told that many ferocious dogs patrol the grounds; they are killers, these dogs. I am defying them. They are nowhere to be found, except in my mind, and I'm out and gone and in the alley with their growls directing my imagination. I am running with fear and exhilaration, beginning a period of summer.
>
> Emerging from the shield of the alley I cut out into the open. Summer is about running and I am running, protected by distance from the dogs. At the corner of Crescent Drive and Lomitas I spot Bobby Tornitzer on a bike. I shout "TORNITZER!" He turns his head. His bike wobbles. An automobile moving rapidly catches Tornitzer's back wheel. Tornitzer is thrown high into the air and on to the concrete sidewalk of Crescent Drive. The driver, a woman with grey hair, swirls from the car hysterically and hovers noisily over Tornitzer, who will not survive the accident. I hold the avocado to my chest and stand, frozen, across the street. I am shivering in the heat, and sink to my knees. It is approximately 3:30 in the afternoon. It is June 21, 1946. In seven days I will be 8 years old. (1975, p. 63.)

One of the first observations my students usually make after reading the essay concerns the abundance of vivid details. Indeed, the first sentence nearly produces a sensory overload: we are introduced to the writer as a young boy running with an avocado he has stolen from a wealthy and "carefully manicured estate" in Beverly Hills. One of the students in the class will invariably ask, "aren't there too many details in this first sentence? Isn't the author trying to tell us too much, too soon?" Such questioning is good; it will blossom into further discussion regarding the entire first paragraph: the language of the narrative itself, the appropriateness of so much physical action at the beginning of an essay, and the narrative voices which appear to fluctuate subtly between the child performing the actual running and the reflective adult writer who is able to acknowledge (years later) that the ferocious guard dogs exist only "in my mind. . .directing my imagination."

As the discussion leader in the classroom, I try to avoid providing answers to student queries regarding the essay's style and structure; I want the class to generate these insights. Consequently, I propose several questions of my own: What specific evidence exists in the first paragraph to indicate that the autobiographical "I" belongs to a child? How does the detailing of incidental imagery contribute to this perception? Why does the author choose to write from a child's point of view? Why is the narrative written in present tense? What evolves is general class participation concerning the connection between theme and style. A simple autobiographical experience from the persona of a seven year-old boy

becomes a way of illustrating how and why effective prose must construct mental images in the mind of the reader--a particularly valuable lesson for young writers who typically are unaware of what constitutes good writing. It is possible to demonstrate that nearly every aspect of Schwartz's writing--sentence length, verb diction, and specificity of detail--contributes to the credibility of an adolescent narrator and the overall interest of the piece. The first paragraph transports the reader into the child's mind in order to approximate his version of summer, replete with languid sentences meant to stretch across lengths of endless Julys and Augusts and verb combinations ("having climbed" and "have snatched") which create an atmosphere of breathless excitement.

In the second paragraph, however, the narrative's action moves from the interior thoughts of the child himself to a more objective, anti-romantic style of writing. While the first paragraph glorifies and indulges the imagination, the second forces both narrator and reader back into reality. The switch in tone and style presents an excellent opportunity for a teacher of writing to discuss the importance of transitions. Using Schwartz as the illustration, students can be shown how a variance in writing style supports a change in writing theme.

From the moment he unwittingly causes the accident which will kill his friend Tornitzer, the narrator is removed from the center of the narrative. Unlike the first paragraph, the major action of the second does not include him--he becomes a helpless bystander unable to influence

the events he is forced to witness. It is thus appropriate that the style of the paragraph should change in order to reflect the narrator's new status. Immediately after shouting "TORNITZER," the autobiographical "I" disappears completely for the next five sentences, and when it returns at the conclusion of the narrative, it is merely as a "frozen" observer, too stunned to engage in further action. Accordingly, the sentences shorten dramatically, the language is tightened by becoming less ebullient and more concise, while all the observations are rendered from a distance with camera-like objectivity. In other words, the style and structure of these individual sentences convey a sense of confinement and helplessness. In doing so successfully, the concluding images of the essay--the narrator gripping the avocado to his chest, shivering in the heat, and sinking to his knees--are rendered all the more meaningful because they contrast so sharply with the theme and style of the first paragraph. Indeed, the opening sentences of the narrative actually mirror the imaginative world of a vacationing child. His sense of freedom is embellished with adjectives and internal musings. The relative absence of these aspects in the second paragraph helps to facilitate the the abrupt sense of shock and sudden numbness; it is language and structure stripped clean of emotional detailing. The second paragraph's action engages the reader as vividly as the first, but the reader is now meant to concentrate only upon the barest events as they are narrowly recorded by a voice devoid of bias. The reassuring shadow of the adult in the first paragraph, secretly acknowledging that there was really little to fear

in stealing the avocado, disappears, or perhaps is redefined in the image of the old woman driver who "swirls from the car hysterically and hovers noisily over Tornitzer."

The use of prose models to improve student writing is not a new technique. They were originally expoused by classical rhetoricians and have since been used by most teachers of composition. But recently the traditional model pedagogy has come under attack as too restrictive because it asks students to imitate writing styles rather than discover their own. In his informative essay "The Prose Model Approach," Paul Eschholz suggests that prose models be introduced into the writing process as the student needs them. Presenting examples to pupils before they have actually begun their own writing, as a product guide rather than as an aid to self-expression, "tends to dictate rules, structures, and patterns for writers. In essence students are encouraged to know what their essays should look like before they have written them" (1980, p. 25). In an effort to avoid the pitfalls Eschholz associates with the traditional approach to using prose models, I tend to present a variety of examples appropriate to a class writing assignment during the week or two in which my students are actively engaged in their own composing. In this way the introduction of polished essays has much less potential for overwhelming young writers; instead of attempting to create exact replicas of someone else's writing, students will tend to pick and choose, incorporating only those points relevant to their immediate needs. Thus, the experience becomes more

individualized as students not only see how other writers have handled similar writing tasks, but go on to integrate some of these strategies into their own composing process.

In providing a composition class with various prose models, and then engaging young writers in critical discourse about the relative merits of a particular writing sample, English teachers illustrate how writers use composing techniques in different ways and with different effects. In examining Schwartz's essay, my students consider the basic components of effective prose--interesting subject matter, accessible language, the interrelationship of style and content, and a vivid sense of time, place, and action--in order to see how these arrangements operate individually and in harmony with one another in creating a definite narrative form. Moreover, since this autobiographical sketch is written by an adult from the perspective of a child, it is an experiment in voice and persona. Analyzing the process demystifies it and encourages students to take similar risks. Depending upon the progress of their own work, my students will frequently draw upon one or two of the aforementioned components and try to weave it into their own writing. At least several members of the class will reshape and revise first drafts--working in more concrete details, for example--as a direct result of Schwartz's influence.

The following essay was written by one of my former students, Vicki, in response to my assignment asking for an autobiographical essay about a particular event focusing on a conflict of emotions. During the

week in which my students were composing their essays, I introduced several prose models, including Schwartz's, and together we spent four class periods explicating the various narrative aspects of each. On the assignment's due date, Vicki gave me this disturbing account of her relationship with an unnamed male (she informed me subsequently that it was her father):

> He had gotten to the point where he did not sleep anymore. If he did I never saw him. I would hear him at all hours of the night pacing from kitchen to living-room, upstairs and downstairs, walking outside around the house and back in again. He went through the bathroom cupboard and late at night, every night--dropping hairbrushes, rearranging the cosmetics, often breaking pill bottles. What was going on? I was so scared. My bedroom door was locked at night.
>
> A year before this he started becoming very irritable, screaming about every small matter: the light left on, a dirty towel on the bathroom floor, the roast not cooked enough. Conversation with him became almost impossible and definitely unbearable. Often he flew into rages over something trivial, mentioning a person he didn't like. Decisions were beyond him, even something as insignificant as what to have for breakfast. His memory lapsed--forgetting things he had done the previous day. Washing and shaving were dropped for days at a time. He looked like hell.
>
> I found it became more and more difficult waking up for classes. The pain would start after being up an hour. It was hard to concentrate. I thought about him instead of the lecture. But the thought of going home (once out) made me sicker. I spent as much time as possible elsewhere--at friends, shopping, in the library, anywhere. I tried to understand why. Was it me? He said it was. And everyone else; there was nothing wrong with him. Sometimes I was sure I could help . . .sometimes I <u>hated</u> him.
>
> I dreamt of him in one of his rages; I was there but detached. Standing above the scene, observing, was another me. I saw him raving--myself very calm--unexplainably content. The dream stayed with me all day. Could I be like that? I wrote down the dream. I saw what I was doing. He wasn't making me sick--I was making me sick. I was turning into <u>him</u> at eighteen.

Although Vicki's writing lacks the polished structural and thematic harmonies of Schwartz's prose, it is still possible to trace his influence throughout her narrative. Perhaps the most impressive parallel between the two writers is in their respective use of vivid and appropriate detailing. Just as Schwartz relies upon a series of contrasting images that startle the reader because of their abrupt juxtaposition, Vicki's prose is likewise engaging as it describes the disruption of both a family relationship and an eighteen year-old woman's personal life. In analyzing the emotional breakdown of her father, Vicki does not supply an objective or clinical psychological profile; she does not attempt an "explanation" of his behavior. Similar to Schwartz's method of relying upon an active narrative "I" in order to place the reader directly into the action, Vicki's prose takes us into her own confusion as we view his erratic conduct from her point of view. As in Schwartz's essay, this technique immediately forces the reader into the restricted perspective of the writer; Vicki's physical and mental environments establish the dual sense of entrapment and fear.

In the first two paragraphs we see evidence of stylistic experimentation considered in class explication of the Schwartz narrative. In classroom dialogue several students wanted to focus on sentence length; was there an ideal criteria for how many words should compose a typical sentence? The class eventually concluded, using Schwartz as the illustration, that sentence lengths and rhythms should depend upon the message the

writer seeks to convey. Vicki's narrative shows that she listened carefully to this discussion of theme-style interrelationships. The internal rhythms of the following sentence, for example, are deliberately constructed to illustrate her father's growing impatience with the world and his inability to feel comfortable in it: "I would hear him at all hours of the night pacing from kitchen to living-room, upstairs and downstairs, walking outside and back in again." There is a certain movement to this sentence, nothing fluid or relaxed, but rather jagged and tense, like the man who is being described. His late-night wandering is haphazard, devoid of direction, and each of the places he momentarily visits is compartmentalized, separated by commas which help indicate that his actions are mechanical and without rational connections. Her sketch is about a man trapped within his own mind, and her use of long sentences that quietly frighten the reader with images of domesticity gone awry, contributes to the portrait of a human being walking a mental tightrope: "A year before this he started becoming very irritable, screaming about every small matter: the light was left on, a dirty towel on the bathroom floor, the roast not cooked enough."

In the first paragraph we learn that her father's daily nocturnal inventory of the bathroom cupboard primarily focuses upon her things, "dropping hairbrushes, rearranging cosmetics." At first glance these details appear insignificant, but they actually highlight the seriousness of Vicki's situation. This man has become so obsessed with Vicki's presence that he cannot avoid contact with her even as she attempts to sleep. Here

is another instance, then, of Vicki employing some of the organizational skills exemplified in the Schwartz model: she uses details and images which connect to the overall theme of her essay. Moreover, the portrait of Vicki herself, awake in bed and listening to her father's pacing, leads effectively to the final sentence of the paragraph--"My bedroom door was locked at night"--and is an entirely appropriate conclusion to a series of terrifying descriptions.

One of the most interesting aspects of Vicki's narrative is her struggle to regain control over her own life by separating it from the man she describes in her essay. Until the final paragraph the writer is unable to define herself outside of her father's encroaching madness; she becomes obsessed with him as he is with her: "I thought about him instead of the lecture. . . . I tried to understand why. Was it me? He said it was." The opening two paragraphs, primarily descriptive, evolve in the third and fourth to include Vicki's personal response; she feels a mixture of guilt, responsibility, anger, repulsion, and pity--all at the same time. It is not until the concluding paragraph, where she actually employs writing to help analyze her predicament, that Vicki recognizes the danger inherent in remaining so deeply involved in her father's illness: "He wasn't making me sick--I was making me sick. I was turning into <u>him</u> at eighteen." Vicki essentially inverts Schwartz's model, moving from an objective description of this man's behavior to a personal response from the writer herself. Like Schwartz, she maintains the "separateness" of these two

perspectives, and this helps give the narrative greater tension and complexity.

The activity of writing, both in the interpretation of her dream as well as in the act of composing this essay for me, provided Vicki with a clearer perspection of how this relationship was transforming her personality. The "unexplainably content" figure from her dream, "Standing above the scene," is understood only after she analyzes it through writing. While we observe her in a helpless and victimized position elsewhere in the narrative, the final paragraph is resolute, and its assertiveness contrasts sharply with the rest of the essay. In the process of putting her emotional torment down on paper, she was able to order it, and by extension, to give it new direction. It is at this junction, where writing becomes a vehicle for clarification and self-discovery, that Vicki's prose intersects Schwartz's for a final time. In the dawning awareness of his role in Tornitzer's accident, Schwartz's childhood innocence is shattered forever; the sketch concludes with his inextricable movement into the adult world of guilt and sorrow. Both Schwartz and Vicki therefore examine painful and disrupting moments from their lives, but in the experience of writing about them--recreating them through language, shaping them into organized prose--a degree of comprehension and (in Vicki's case) control is eventually re-established.

I am aware that few student essayists will produce writing as sophisticated and textured as Schwartz's model. On the other hand, his

emphasis on language, style, and the importance of writing as a vehicle for self-knowledge helps my composition classes to become more conscious of these principles and to try and integrate them into their own work. Young writers must learn the various mechanics of prose composition, but these techniques alone will not make them accomplished writers. They need to study examples of how these methods combine to produce cogent essays. Exercises in sentence structure and paragraph organization enhance writing skills, but examining relevant prose models concurrent with their own writing gives students options and strategies for developing those skills. As Frank D'Angelo has argued persuasively, "the student, in assimilating the best features of a writer's style, will produce discourse that in time will come to rival the model itself" (1978, p. 283). Furthermore, introducing prose models to a class that has already commenced a writing assignment helps its members to treat their own work more seriously. The same elements which English teachers stress as important in published models are likewise possible in student prose. If both student and teacher are convinced of this potential, students will begin to view their essays as minor pieces of literature, and the self-esteem engendered from such a perspective cannot be overstated. Vicki might have written a fine essay about her father without an understanding of the Schwartz model, but it remains my conviction that both her writing style and the confidence to pursue so difficult and personal a subject theme were strengthened as a result of her introduction to his prose.

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